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AUTHOR Lindner, Barbara
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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the mismatch between the diversity of American families and the structure of the schools. An examination of the history of the family reveals that the family of the past was very different from the idealized versions popularized in the media. Data concerning divorce, single-parent families, intergenerational interaction, out-of-wedlock births, teen pregnancy, and cohabitation indicate similarities and differences between the families of past and present. Several closely related and distinct myths about the American family affect social legislation and policy. Prevailing myths are those of the monolithic family form, the independent family, and parental determinism regarding child outcomes. To the extent that the schools' often inflexible structure does not correspond to the diversity of families, schools support, reinforce, and perpetuate these myths. Most schools are still organized around the myths and accomodate the mythical family. Schools can change to meet the needs of the contemporary family by becoming aware of the constraints on the various family forms, and by increasing the involvement of parents, business, and social welfare agencies in the schools. (RH)

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Family Diversity and School Policy

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FAMILY DIVERSITY AND SCHOOL POLICY

by Barbara Lindner

EDUCATION COMMISSION OF THE STATES
1860 Lincoln Street, Suite 300
Denver, Colorado 80295

December 1987

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FOREWORD

This paper is the fourth of an Education Commission of the States (ECS) series focusing on the problems of youth at risk of not successfully making the transition to adulthood — the dropout, the underachiever and far too many others of our young people who end up disconnected from school and society. The topic of this paper is an intersection that frequently causes confusion and frustration when state policy makers develop state education strategies — the mismatch between the diversity of American families and the rather inflexible school structures.

This paper is designed to outline the controversy that surrounds, and present data describing, the contemporary American family. The paper is meant to raise issues, not to resolve them. The goal is to force the reader to come to grips with these mismatches as they engage in policy deliberations. Barbara Lindner provides an excellent roadmap through the many controversies that accompany this issue.

Barbara Lindner, senior consultant on education policy for ECS, has an extensive research and publications background in areas relating to the study of the changing American family. She is presently at work on a study of parental involvement for Missouri Governor John Ashcroft as well as performing independent research on youth policy development. She holds a Ph.D. in American studies. In addition to her writing, Lindner has taught at universities in Colorado and Ohio.

We would like to thank the persons and organizations that have made this paper and this series possible. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York have supported the recent work of the ECS At-Risk Project.

Most important to this effort were the scholars and practitioners who took time from their busy schedules to attend the Family Life and School Success Meeting held at the ECS offices on May 15, 1987 (see Appendix A). Their knowledge and insights helped us to realize the important facets of this issue.

The author would also like to thank Robert Palaich, Sherry Freeland Walker, Rexford Brown, Patrick Callan, Patricia Flakus-Mosqueda, Van Dougherty, Barbara J. Holmes and Esther Rodriguez for comments on earlier drafts of the paper.

Frank Newman
ECS President

Bob Palaich
Project Director

INTRODUCTION

The current state of the family is a topic of heated debate. Some scholars argue that recent trends, especially the rising divorce rate and declining marriage and birth rates, are evidence that the family is falling apart. Others argue that the family is not falling apart, it is just changing. Myths and misconceptions about the family abound in the popular press.

While the family has changed, schools have not changed as rapidly. If schools are to educate all children effectively, policy makers and educators must confront the facts and dispel the myths. They need to understand how school policies have been influenced by misconceptions and devise new ways of addressing the changing family.

The family with a husband who works and wife who stays at home is not the typical American family. The single-parent and dual career families are statistically the norm. While most research contends that dual-career families are increasingly integrating work life with family life, the most recent and controversial research, conducted by Janet G. and Larry L. Hunt, vigorously argues that work and families are becoming increasingly polarized.

This polarization suggests two distinct lifestyles: career-centered versus family-centered. Rather than the division of labor by sex, the polarization is shifting from gender to parental status, and this new polarization could clearly lead to increasing anti-family sentiment. In other words, work-place discrimination will be against men and women with children.

Because other structures of society, including the schools, are not facilitating the integration of family and career, and in some cases are actually inhibiting that integration, young people may be forced to choose between public power through a

career or family involvement. Men and women who want a family may be forced to settle for jobs rather than careers.

This potential polarization has frightening implications for the future of the family. Those who choose career over family may be less willing to contribute to family-support services and will have more power to determine where tax monies are spent.[1]

Recognizing that families cannot be entirely self-sufficient, society must acknowledge that today's families need some help raising their children. And the schools can play an important role in this.

THE CONTROVERSY: FAMILY HEALTH OR DECAY?

That the American family has undergone profound changes over the past century is undeniable. Divorce is increasing, the number of single-parent families is rising, intergenerational interaction is changing, and out-of-wedlock births and cohabitation are increasing. Interpretations of those changes, however, vary enormously. Alarmists warn that the family is on the verge of annihilation. Others argue that the family is "here to stay" and that all sectors of society must come to terms with, and accept, the multiplicity of family forms.

Anxiety over the imminent ruin of the family has fueled nostalgia. An examination of the history of the family, however, reveals that there was no golden age of the family to which to return. The family of the past was very different from the idealized versions popularized in movies, television sitcoms and romantic novels.

Divorce: The recent rising divorce rate (a trend that is more than a century old) may indicate an increase in marital failure; on the other hand, desertion (legally unrecognized) was prevalent in earlier times.[2] The rising divorce rate may also indicate that Americans expect more from marriage today than in the past. The point is that recent marriages are not necessarily better or worse than those of the past -- they are simply different. As family historian John Demos pointed out, to declare marriages of the past better because there were fewer legal divorces is to ignore historical changes.[3]

Despite the rising divorce rate, other historical factors suggest increased stability in the American family. When life spans for parents were significantly shorter, orphanhood was commonplace. Now orphanhood is rare, which may increase family stability. While divorce counteracts this stability, the consequences of death are far more disruptive for children than those of divorce.[4]

Single-Parent Families: Nearly 15 million children under age 18 live in a single-parent family. The number of children living only with their fathers more than doubled in the last 15 years, and there has been a significant increase in the number of families with children headed by women.[5] In 1960, only 7% of all families with children were headed by women; by 1986, this percentage had soared to 19%.[6] This dramatic increase is often cited as conclusive evidence of family deterioration. However, a look back in history makes this figure look less portentous: At the turn of the century, 19% of all Boston families were headed by women.[7]

Intergenerational Interaction: The average lifespan increase — from 50 years in 1900 to 73 years in 1976 — also has had a profound impact on the family. This change in mortality greatly expands the potential for intergenerational interaction.[8] Indeed, for the first time in history, a significant number of families have four living generations.[9] The popular notion that American preindustrial households included extended kin, and that three generations lived together in one household, is not upheld by recent demographic research: Nuclear households have always been the fundamental family unit in America.[10]

Out-of-Wedlock Births/Teen Pregnancy: The statistics on teen pregnancy are by now familiar. More than 1 million teenagers become pregnant each year, and four out of five of them are unmarried. Pregnancy and birth rates are more than four times higher for black teens than white teens.[11] Children born out of wedlock were also a major social problem of the past, however. Throughout the 18th century there was a growing tolerance for premarital sex; the problem was how to care for the illegitimate children brought into the world. Also, by the middle of the 18th century, "as many as one-third to one-half of the brides in some communities were going to the altar pregnant."[12]

Cohabitation: According to U.S. Census Bureau figures, 523,000 couples were cohabiting in 1970. That number tripled by 1980, nearly doubling between 1975 and 1980. In 1980 there were two million unmarried-couple households. While the prevalence of cohabitation is rapidly increasing, it is more often a premarriage or interim arrangement than an alternative to or rejection of marriage. Furthermore, persons who cohabit intend to marry at approximately the same rate as those who do not. Most cohabitors, almost 75%, do not have children in the home, although there has been a dramatic increase since 1977 in the absolute number of cohabitors with children.[13]

These statistics demonstrate that the family is certainly in flux. It is important to point out, however, that while these are striking changes taking place in the family, there are also powerful continuities. As family sociologists Arlene and Jerome Skolnick remark:

> . . . when the statistics of family life are plotted for the entire 20th century, or back into the 19th century, a surprising finding emerges: today's young people — with their low marriage, high divorce and low fertility rates — appear to be behaving in ways consistent with long-term historical trends. . . .The recent changes in family life only appear deviant when compared to what people were doing in the 1940s and 1950s. The now middle-aged adults who married young, moved to the suburbs and had three, four or more children were the generation that departed from 20th-century trends.[14]

IMAGES AND MYTHS

Society's images and ideals of what the typical American family is have changed over time. How the fa · · is viewed is based partly on fact and partly on fiction, including several closely related and distinct myth that affect not only internal evaluatio s of one's own family, but also social legislation and policy. The most prevailing and popula myths are (1) the myth of the monolithic family form; (2) the myth of the independent family; and (3) the myth of parental determinism.

The Myth of the Monolithic Famil Form

The idealized image of family life in American cultu has led to a popular conception of the "typical" American family — a husband who works and a wife who stays at home with 2.2 dependent children in a single-fam y home in the suburbs.

This monolithic model, however, excludes most of the population. Nevertheless, it is strongly embedded in the collective unconscious and in government and school policies and structures.

The reality is that diverse family structures have existed throughout American history. The multiplicity of family types in America today is a result of both historical factors and more recent economic changes.

- **Female Labor Force Participation:** Perhaps the most dramatic change affecting the family is the large influx of women into the labor force — especially women with children. The proportion of children with mothers in the labor force increased from 39% in 1970 to 58% in 1986. In 1986, half of all children under age 6, and 62% of those between the ages of 6 and 17, had mothers who were working, or looking for work outside the home.[15] Because most women are in the labor force out of economic necessity, this is not likely to change.

- **Single-Parent Families:** Paul Glick, former senior demographer at the U.S. Bureau of the Census, describes the trend in single-parent families: "As more young adults postpone marriage and more young parents become divorced, the number of married-couple households with children in the home is expected actually to decrease, while the number of one-parent households increases by one-third between 1981 a.id 1990."[16]

Presently, one-fourth of all marriages end in divorce. Two-thirds of all divorces involve couples with children under 16 and approximately one-fourth involve couples with children under 5. The total number of single-parent families has increased 50% over the last decade. The National Council for One-Parent Families estimates that there are approximately 1 billion single-parent families with 1.6 million children in them.[17]

- **Families With Two Working Parents:** "As of 1986, half of all married mothers with infant children 1 year old or under were working or looking for work. In 1975, the comparable proportion was 31%, and in 1970, only 24%. By the time their youngest child is 4 years old, nearly 60% of today's married mothers are in the work force." Almost 70% of married mothers with school-age children are employed.[18]

- **Stepfamilies/Joined Families:** One in every five marriages is a remarriage for one or both of the partners. Within five years after divorce, three-quarters of all divorced people are remarried.[19] It is projected that about 59% of all children born in the early 1980s may expect to live with only one parent for at least a year and two-thirds of these children will probably live with a step-parent.[20]

- **Racial and Ethnic Minorities:** Racial and ethnic minorities exhibit some different characteristics than other dominant American family forms. Over the past two centuries, immigrants and blacks have been two major sources of family diversity. Demos explains that the United States is, and always has been, a nation of immigrants: "From the early 19th century onward, immigrants have flowed in a vast tide to America from all parts of Europe. Differing widely in language, religion, and custom, these groups have also presented special variants of family life. . . ."[21]

As Glick points out, the demographic statistics "throw a considerable light on the differing living arrangements of young children, but they do not reveal the wide differences in the adjustment problems that the children face according to how they relate to the adults in whose homes they live."[22]

The Myth of Family Independence

> The myth of self-sufficiency blinds us to the workings of other forces in family life. For families are not now, nor were they ever, the self-sufficient building blocks of society, exclusively responsible, praiseworthy and blamable for their own destiny. They are deeply influenced by broad social and economic forces over which they have little control.[23]
>
> - Kenneth Keniston

The view that as other institutions have expropriated traditional family functions parents have more time for emotional involvement with children shows only a partial grasp of the situation. Major changes in the family have made the family increasingly dependent, and it can be argued that changing family functions have left families with more to do rather than less.[24]

In the 17th and 18th centuries, most families fit, to some degree, the myth of family independence. They were generally self-sufficient economic/agricultural units, and all family members had important, productive roles in the household. With the emergence of the factory system, these economic units were destroyed; family life and work became two separate and distinct realms.

While the disintegration of the family as an economic unit is generally viewed as the most significant change the American family has undergone, the second major change was the removal of education. With the emergence of the "common school" in the mid-19th century, "formal education began to replace family education rather than assist it" (emphasis added).[25] As family historian Kenneth Keniston states:

> Compulsory, free public education. . .marked another inroad on traditional family functions. . . . For a total of 14 to 16 years, the average American child spends the better part of most weekdays not in the presence of his or her family, but in the presence of day-care workers or teachers and other children the same age. It is hard to imagine a more crucial change in the role of the family.[26]

While many traditional family functions, such as education, have been taken over by other institutions, many new and equally demanding functions have emerged. These new roles have made families more dependent on outside experts. Fulfilling emotional needs, coordinating outside agencies and the demanding standards of parenting are challenging new responsibilities for parents.[27]

As work became increasingly impersonal and unsatisfying under industrialization, parents and children began to expect emotional support and fulfillment exclusively from within the family structure, leading to potential emotional overload. "Expectations of sharing . . . have risen as other family functions have diminished,"[28] says Keniston.

Society's expectations about the needs of children have changed, and these rising expectations are critical for understanding the transformation of families. Much of what is considered the right of all Americans -- education, for example -- was unknown to parents in the past. As expectations about the rights and needs of children have risen, new institutions and specialists have emerged. As Keniston notes, "Part of the change of family functions, which carries with it a new dependence on people and institutions outside the family, rests on the family's need for forms of help and expert assistance that are the creations of the last century."[29]

As Keniston points out, "parents today have a demanding new role choosing, meeting, talking with and coordinating the experts, the technology and the institutions that help bring up their children. . . .No longer able to do it all themselves, parents are in some ways like the executives in a large firm -- responsible for the smooth coordination of the many people and processes that must work together to produce the final product. . . ."[30]

The myth of separate worlds is closely related to the myth of family independence. This myth portrays the world of work and the world of the family as two distinct realms operating independently of each other. Sociologists Maxine Baca Zinn and D. Stanley Eitzen summarize the contradiction inherent in the myth of separate worlds and the reality of the dependent nature of the two domains:

> On the one hand, the family is considered to be a private institution providing a haven from the burdens of responsibility and work. On the other hand, families are expected to adapt to the conditions of work, to socialize children to become competent workers and to provide emotional support to workers to enhance their effectiveness. The myth of separate worlds ignores that family functioning depends on the pay, hours and other demands of work as well as on interactions with other institutions that provide services to families, such as schools and government.... Recent research on work and family linkages has sharpened this understanding. Yet the popular conception of the family remains that of an autonomous setting untouched by the public world. This split vision is rooted in certain social realities. Modern society does demarcate public and private spheres, with family being the quintessentially private arena. However, the private character of the family does not prevent society from intruding on every aspect of family life.[31]

The Myth of Parental Determinism

Social scientists and the public share the view that early family experience is the most powerful influence in a child's life. However, recent empirical research in the area of human development shows that children are born with unique personality characteristics, "so that children shape parents as much as parents shape children" and that "[c]hildren are active agents in the construction of knowledge about the world."[32] Encouraging the belief that children know nothing about the world except what parents teach, the parental determinism model often leads to conclusions that blame parents.[33]

The Skolnicks provide a vivid example of the parent-blame approach. "Poor black children . . . do badly in school because their parents fail to use the right teaching techniques. It is easier to blame the parents than to change the neighborhood, the school or the economy or to assume that ghetto children's correct perception of their life chances has something to do with school performance."[34]

The generalizations that mothers on welfare are lazy, that working mothers neglect their children, that parents don't spend enough time with or supervise their children, are all central to the parent-blame approach. And if parents are to blame, it follows that the solution lies in changing or reforming parents. However, as Keniston says:

> There is nothing to be gained by blaming ourselves and other individuals for family changes. We need to look instead to the broader economic and social forces that shape the experience of children and parents. Parents are not abdicating — they are being dethroned by forces they cannot influence, much less control. Behind today's uncertainty among parents lies a trend of several centuries toward the transformation and redefinition of family life.[35]

Unfortunately, the myths of family independence and parental determinism bolster the perception that those needing help are inadequate, rather than the system. This moralizing feature "tells us that for a family to need help — or at least to admit it publicly — is to confess failure," says Keniston. "Similarly, to give help, however

generously, is to acknowledge the inadequacy of the recipients and indirectly to condemn them, to stigmatize them and even to weaken what impulse they have toward self-sufficiency."[36]

FAMILY MYTHS AND SCHOOL STRUCTURES: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL POLICY

Myths about the family are played out in U.S. schools every day. In some cases, schools support, reinforce and perpetuate these myths because their monolithic structure does not match the diversity of families. Indeed, most schools are structured to accommodate the mythical family composed of a husband who works and a wife who stays at home.

The length of the school day, the school calendar, the scheduling of parent-teacher conferences, special events and programs, procedures for dealing with sick children, extracurricular activities and the expectations of and opportunities for parental involvement are designed to suit the family with a full-time, stay-at-home mother.

Because the mythical family also is seen as the ideal family, there is a danger that teachers and administrators may judge and stereotype other types of families. This evaluation process, while unconscious, may lead to labeling children improperly, based on family background.

Because family independence and parental determinism are myths, policy makers and educators must acknowledge the fact that today's families need help raising their children. According to Keniston: "The problem is not so much to reeducate parents but to make available the help they need and to give them enough power so that they can be effective advocates with and coordinators of the other forces that are bringing up their children. "[37]

> . . .the first thing to remember about the American family is that it doesn't exist. Families exist. All kinds of families in all kinds of economic and marital situations, as all of us can see. . . .The American family? Just which American family did you have in mind? Black or white, large or small, wealthy or poor, or somewhere in between? Did you mean a father-headed, mother-headed or childless family? First- or second-time around? Happy or miserable? Your family or mine?[38]
>
> Louise Kapp Howe

Because there are so many different families, needs, and therefore policies, will vary dramatically among states, communities, schools and families. Different situations will require different solutions and policies. The following are only a few possibilities.

What elements should schools be aware of? First of all, school officials must recognize that single-parent families and families with two working parents find it difficult to juggle competing demands, such as scheduling parent/teacher conferences and attending special events, both of which are usually held during work hours. Take Emily's situation, for example.

> Emily is a single mother, working full-time to support her two children, 3rd-grade Theresa and 3-year-old Jimmy. Emily must be at work by 8 a.m. which means leaving the house at 7:30 to drop Jimmy off at day care. Theresa's school bus doesn't pick her up until 8:15. Were if it not for a neighbor who takes care of Theresa until the bus comes, Emily might not be able to keep her job or Theresa would have to stay alone.
>
> Emily missed a half day of work last week to attend Theresa's school conference. Today the day care calls for her to pick up Jimmy, who is sick. Emily is frantic. She has no one to care for him so she must leave work. She realizes immediately that she won't be able to take off the time she wants to attend Theresa's school play, which is only staged during school hours, and she fears her employer will be angry that she is leaving work again. In addition, her sick leave allows her to miss work only if she is ill, meaning she will lose pay if she takes off or will be forced to lie and say she is the one sick.
>
> Emily spends too much time at work juggling her work and family schedules. She lives in constant fear that one of the kids will get sick, or that she will lose one of her child-care arrangements. She feels guilty that she can't get more involved in Theresa's school, and that Theresa can't get involved in extra activities, like the swim team at the YWCA.

Educators also should pay more attention to fathers. Some single parents are fathers, and many others are becoming increasingly involved in the upbringing of their children — they are not the passive observers summoned only in emergency situations as depicted on Father Knows Best or Leave it to Beaver.

The special situation of joined families also must be understood and taken into account when scheduling conferences, communicating with parents and keeping them informed of the child's progress. A child who lives with two parents, one of whom is a step-parent, may have another interested parent elsewhere. School personnel need to know who the non-custodial parents are and how to communicate with them. This also applies to a child who lives with one parent after a divorce.

In general, teachers and other school administrators need to be aware of and accept the diversity of families. Different families have strikingly different needs, and if those varying needs are not considered, the emotional and intellectual growth and achievement of the child may suffer.

A few schools have begun to adapt to the needs of the contemporary family by offering such services as before- and after-school care. All, however, expect parental involvement more in keeping with the mythical parent-at-home family than with today's families, most of which have two working parents.

What could schools do? Instead of expecting parents to adapt to the school's agenda, teachers and administrators should consider spending time in the neighborhoods and homes of the students they teach. Not only will this provide them with a better understanding of the diversity of the families they are serving, it will deepen their understanding of the special needs of the students and their parents. These visits could take several different forms.

- **Meetings and events:** Schools serving more than one neighborhood could schedule PTA and other meetings and events in all, or at least alternating, neighborhoods served by the school.

- **Neighborhood Visits:** Too many teachers have no idea what kind of environment their students come from. In Denver, Colorado, elementary grade students gave their teachers a tour of their neighborhood.

- **Home Visits:** Teachers who visit the homes of students find they make progress in getting families involved in the education of their children. Home visits are a popular and effective approach for preschool programs and should be considered for all grade levels. This is an especially effective method of involving low-income families, who tend to have the greatest difficulty getting involved in the schools.

- **Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP):** The new federal Infant and Toddler Program under P.L. 99-457 requires that an IFSP be developed by a multi-disciplinary team and the parents. It includes "a statement of major outcomes expected to be achieved for the child and family." This is another possible strategy for involving parents of K-12 students. If families are told what the school expects of their children, they may be better able to encourage and help the children achieve their goals.

Connecting Work, Families and Schools

Achieving a high level of parent involvement in the schools requires collaborations that extend beyond the family and schools. Responsibilities of business and social welfare agencies must be examined and defined.

Developing an awareness and understanding of the diversity of family needs does not suggest that teachers must take on all additional responsibilities. Schools, and especially individual teachers, cannot be expected to play every role and provide every service. There are, however, many community services available that families may not be aware of. Schools could be the connecting point, directing families to the appropriate agency and helping with the coordination of services. At least one person in each school (the school nurse or counselor, for example) should know where to get aid, such as that provided by social services, health-care agencies, the public housing authority, emergency services, employment agencies and services, welfare agencies, day-care and after-school care providers and other state and community organizations.

The business community should take more responsibility for children and youth. It can begin by providing structures (and flexibility) to facilitate the integration of work and family. In fact, the business/corporate community has an economic interest in helping parents with their children. Parents without the stresses and strains of worrying about what they will do if their child gets sick, where they will get day care or after-school care and the hundreds of other problems parents face daily, have been found to be happier, more productive workers.

The following are some examples of how business might help parents.

- **Child Care Information and Coordination:** Companies could provide parents with information on different types of child care (day care, sick-child care, after-school care and child care during school holidays and vacations) available in the area. This potentially could save the work time employees might spend making phone calls to interview potential providers or juggle care arrangements. Personnel offices might offer parents lists of nearby services.

- **On-Site Day Care:** Some firms are beginning to experiment with on-site day care for children of employees, and many are seeing excellent results. This tends to be more feasible and cost-effective for large companies.

- **Flexible Hours:** Where possible, giving parents more flexibility in the hours they work may lead to more productivity and fewer missed work hours.

- **Personal Leave Days:** Firms could consider adding personal leave days or substituting personal leave for one or two regular holidays to give parents more opportunities to take part in school events.

- **Sick Leave for Families:** Sick-leave policies could be adjusted where necessary to allow leave when other members of the immediate family are ill.

- **Working in the Home:** Some jobs could be done at home as well as at the office. Firms that have tried this report that employees tend to be honest about how much they work and are productive.

There is clearly a mismatch between family needs and school structures. Understanding the diversity of the family in American society prior to developing school policies and designing programs is essential. If this diversity is ignored, schools may be erecting yet another barrier to the education of youth and the family's ability to take part in that education.

Most schools are still organized around the conventional assumptions and myths. While these are not wrong for all children and families, they fail to reflect the diversity of American families.

APPENDIX A

Diane August
Director, Education Division
Children's Defense Fund
122 C. Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20001

Reginald Clark
1050 North College Avenue
Claremont, California 91711

Joyce Epstein
Principal Research Scientist
CREMS
Director, Effective Middle Schools Program
3505 N. Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21218

Stephen Hamilton
Department of Human Development
and Family Studies
G-57, MVR Hall
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York 14853

John Hannum
Principal
Halsted Street School
59 Halsted Street
Newton, NJ 07860

Barbara J. Lindner
Assistant Professor
Department of Sociology
Box 28
Metropolitan State College
1006 11th Street
Denver, Colorado 80204

Jesse Vela
Coordinator
Texas Migrant Interstate Program
P.O. Drawer Y
Pharr, Texas 78577

C.J. White
Professor
Department of Sociology
Box 28
Metropolitan State College
1006 11th Street
Denver, Colorado 80204

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